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Author(s): Chaman Lal
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PUNJABI DALIT LITERATURE

Dalit Trend in Punjabi Literature

Chaman Lal

Punjabi society, in general, is not infested with caste divisions at a very alarming level, as one can see in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra. In medieval times, the Bhakti Movement of North India and especially the rise and growth of Sikhism has played a positive role in shaping the Punjabi people's psyche. The impact of Sufism through poets like Sheikh Farid and Bulle Shah etc., also made Punjabi culture more integrated. In modern times, social reformist movements like 'Singh Sabha Lehar' and 'Arya Samaj Movement' also helped people to treat each other with respect. Radical political movements like 'Ghadar Party', 'Babbar Akali Movement' and Bhagat Singh's movement in the twentieth century helped shape Punjabi society as a non-communal, non-casteist one.

In spite of all these positive social developments in medieval and modern times, one cannot overlook the fact that the worst kind of communal carnage took place in Punjab in 1947, when Hindus and Sikhs on the one side and Muslims on the other, forgot what *Guru Granth Sahib* taught them and Sufism sought to inculcate in their personalities. In the same way, even though the caste-based clashes are not so intense in Punjab as in some other states, one cannot overlook the social reality that in rural areas, caste and class divisions exist and, at times, they manifest quite sharply. In spite of Guru Sahib's teachings, separate gurdwaras have been constructed by different castes of Punjabi people, a thing which would have been abhorred by the Gurus themselves. There has been ostracism of the economically poor lower castes

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practised by the upper castes; and the lower castes are dependent for livelihood on the upper castes. The ostracism is on the issue of the rate of daily wages etc.

The existence of Dalits in Punjab as a downtrodden section of the society, is a natural ground for the emergence of a Dalit trend in literature as well.

The earliest Dalit-oriented literature in Punjab is in the form of *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib* itself. The book, now having the status of religious authority for sikh community, was edited by the fifth sikh Guru, Guru Arjun Dev, in early seventeenth century. This includes the poetic *bani* of sikh Gurus, as well as that of the Bhaktas of north India. Thus *Adi Granth* includes the *bani* of six sikh Gurus—Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amardass, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjun Dev from the first to the fifth Guru in a succession—and that of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur. The *bani* of the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh is not included in this book, except for one *shabd*. Apart from the writings of Sikh Gurus, the poetry of all major Bhakti poets, including Kabir, Ravi Dass, Nam Dev Sain, Peepa, Dhanna, Farid etc., forms the body of *Adi Granth*. All the Sikh Gurus and Bhaktas were anti-casteists and *Adi Granth*, in this sense, is a sharp indictment of the caste-ridden Indian society. In fact, Sikh Gurus and Bhaktas were against all kinds of oppression of mankind.

However, when we talk of Dalit trend in literature, it is in the context of modern Indian literature. The term Dalit acquired respectability after establishing itself as a major trend in modern Marathi literature. Since then, this trend is trying to acquire pan-Indian character, by finding place in the rest of the Indian languages. Yet, after Marathi, it is only in Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi and Punjabi that it has created a niche for itself.

In modern Punjabi literature, one can find Dalit characters in fiction from the very beginning. In the short-story, Principal Sujan Singh, one of the founders of Punjabi short story, is also considered the harbinger of Dalit voice in literature. As most of his short stories depict the sufferings of poorer people, a number of Dalit characters crop up in his stories, as the majority of the poor people come from Dalit background. However, Sujan Singh never identified himself as a Dalit writer. He was part and parcel of the progressive stream of Punjabi literature and it was progressive literature that paid attention to the sufferings of Dalit people, both at economic as well as at social levels.

The tradition set by Sujan Singh was further consolidated by short-story writers like Santokh Singh Dhir and Gurdial Singh. With the

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impact of the Naxalite movement on Punjabi literature, the trend got a further impetus. Writers like Prem Gorkhi, Kirpal Kazak, Attarjeet, Bhura Singh Kaler, Nachhatar, Lal Singh etc., made their Dalit identity vibrant through their short stories. Thus "Bathloo Chamar" by Attarjeet, in the late seventies, brought Dalit sufferings to centre stage in Punjabi literature. "Arjun Safedi Wala" by Prem Gorkhi, "Tutte Pattee" by Bhura Singh Kaler etc., also depicted the anguished social reality of the Dalits.

In the late eighties and early nineties, Dalit trend in literature became a reality. Thus the younger generations of short-story writers like Bhagwant Rasulpuri, Des Raj Kali, Jinder etc. identified themselves more vocally and clearly with Dalit movement.

In the field of the novel, though Nank Singh, Jaswant Singh Kanwal, Kartar Singh Duggal, Surinder Singh Narula etc., depicted the sufferings of Dalit life, yet the real Dalit hero emerged in the form of Jagseer of *Marhi Da Diwa*. This novel by Gurdial Singh was published in the late sixties and it proved to be a path-breaking Punjabi novel. Later, Gurdial Singh wrote many more novels and he still is in the process of writing. In *Anhoe* and *Parsa* he continued the tradition set by himself in *Marhi Da Diwa*.

Sohan Singh Sital is another respected Punjabi novelist who has depicted Dalit life in a very sympathetic manner. In his more famous novels like *Tutan Wala Khuh* and *Jug Badal Gaya*, he had delineated Dalit characters with sensitivity. Another novelist who has focused on Dalit life, but who was not paid proper attention, to was Gurcharan Singh Rao. Though he wrote many novels, his novel *Mashalchi*, is a powerful one, dealing with the life of Dalits in the rural set up of Punjab. Rao died at a premature age and his novel is yet to get due attention from critics.

Jaswant Virdi's novel *Nihchal Nahi Cheet* focusses on the life of Vishwakarma, the deity of working people, coming from lower castes. *Dastan Dalitan Di* a novel by Ninder Gill makes an elaborate socio-political study of Dalit life in Punjab, but in the process, it loses the art of the novel and becomes more of a journalistic reportage.

In recent times, Nachhatar's novel *Baki Da Sach* is also related to Dalit life. There are many more novels and novelists in Punjabi dealing with Dalit life.

The first Dalit autobiography in Punjabi, created by Prem Gorkhi, *Gair Hazir Aadmi* (The Absent Person) was published in 1994, a year before the first Dalit autobiography appeared in Hindi. Autobiography is a dominant genre in Marathi Dalit literature and it was expected that in other languages too, the autobiography will represent the Dalit

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trend more distinctly. But it has not happened. Moreover the languages other than Marathi, are not following the pattern of Marathi autobiography. Marathi Dalit autobiographies are a matter of fact depiction of Dalit life, however crude it might be. The first Punjabi Dalit autobiography is more of a romantic depiction of Dalit life; though painful and anguished, the writer has presented it, in an artful, dramatic form.

In drama and one-act-play, Harcharan Singh depicted many Dalit characters in his plays, as in *Ratta Salu*. Balwant Gargi, though Romantic in his orientation, has depicted the anguished reality of Dalit characters in his plays like *Loha Kutt, Kesro* and *Kanak Di Balli.* In contemporary times prominent playwrights like C.D. Sidhu and Ajmer Aulakh are focusing more on Dalit sufferings in their plays.

In Punjabi poetry, Dalit trend is quite strong. A large number of Punjabi poets come from Dalit background, yet, not all of them make Dalit life as a centre of their creation. In fact some of the non-Dalit poets are more sensitive to the sufferings of Dalits, such as the revolutionary Punjabi poet, Paash.

Lal Singh Dil has been projected in recent times as a major Punjabi Dalit poet. While there is no denying the fact that Lal Singh Dil is a major poet of Punjabi today, yet one cannot say with certainty, that, he represents just the Dalit sensibility. In fact, Dil is also the product of the revolutionary trend of Punjabi literature of the early seventies, which produced talented poets and writers like Paash, Waryam Sandhu, Surjit Patar, Ajmeer Aulakh and many others.

In the real sense, Gurdas Ram Aalam is a more representative Dalit poet, who had focused on Dalit life in all his collections of poetry. The late Manjit Qadar, the late Sant Ram Udasi, Gurmit Kalarmajri, Madan Vira, Dharam Kameana etc. are some of the other contemporary Punjabi poets, who are trying to make Dalit trend in Punjabi poetry as an established reality.

There is very little critical writing on Dalit literature in Punjabi. Gurbachan has mentioned about the Dalit writers neglected by critics. Prem Prakash brought out one 'caste' issue of his paper *Lakeer* in 1995, but in the whole issue he did not mention the term 'Dalit' even once; the issue was more keen to tell us the real 'castes' of Punjabi writers, than discuss Dalit trend in literature. 'Dalit Sahit Sabha' was formed in Punjab in recent times and it held the first 'Punjabi Dalit Sahit Conference' in 1994 at Phagwara. The papers of this conference were published later, but most of the papers take cue from Marathi Dalit

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Literature. Some are translations. Very little has been written on Dalit tradition in Punjabi literature. When a three-day national symposium on 'Dalit and Feminist Trends in Indian literature,' was held in April 1995 at Kurukshetra University, no paper was presented on Dalit trend in Punjabi literature, though there was a paper on Feminist trend. In this sense, Dalit trend in Punjabi literature is yet in embryonic form. It would need to be taken care of a lot, before the trend can really make its presence felt in a worthwhile fashion. It would also need a lot of intellectual churning, which has not yet begun happening among Punjabi scholars.

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